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Chair

Mr. Neil Ellis

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● (1105)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Neil Ellis (Bay of Quinte, Lib.)): I have some housekeeping items here.

The meeting on main estimates with the minister has been postponed until June 7, unfortunately.

Our report on barriers to transitions will be tabled on May 23.

This is the second meeting on the study of needs and issues specific to indigenous veterans and the witnesses are the same ones who were supposed to be here on May 10. Thank you for your patience and availability, and thank you for re-booking. It's a special time with the Canadian Armed Forces Indigenous Awareness Week celebrations.

In the first panel we'd like to welcome Robert Thibeau, President, Aboriginal Veterans Autochtones, a nationally incorporated organization that represents the interests of Canadian aboriginal veterans and serving members who are of aboriginal descent. Mr. Thibeau will also take time to brief us for our trip, which we will do from May 27 to June 1.

We also have Robert Bertrand. He's the National Chief, and is here for moral support. He's a former MP. Thank you for coming today.

Welcome, both of you.

Mr. Thibeau, we'll start with your opening statement. You have 10 minutes.

Mr. Robert Thibeau (President, Aboriginal Veterans Autochtones): Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, good morning. I wish to acknowledge that today we meet on Algonquin territory, land that has never been ceded or surrendered. I once again thank the Algonquin Nation for the privilege to meet here and speak specifically regarding our indigenous warrior veterans, while acknowledging all of our veterans, as well as members of the armed forces and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

Let me begin by offering sincere thanks to your committee for the announcement that you will be undertaking visits to some of our indigenous communities across a big part of Canada to gain knowledge and information regarding our distinguished indigenous veterans. This marks the first time that the Government of Canada has decided to seek first-hand information from our veterans, and we hope this will lead to a stronger understanding of the many issues faced by our veterans and in our communities.

AVA was hoping that the visits would have included more communities in all reaches of Canada—north, south, east, and west—but I also acknowledge this as being a very good starting point. I was just recently informed that later on this year you are undertaking plans to visit the north of Canada, which I think will be one of your biggest challenges. Again, *meegwetch*.

As president of the Aboriginal Veterans Autochtones, I once again appear here to represent the indigenous veterans from my organization and indigenous veterans from the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples and the Assembly of First Nations through a memo of understanding. This presentation is one that I feel has great significance, as it deals directly with indigenous veterans.

History reveals that as of the War of 1812, which was long before Canada became its own country, indigenous support was essential to the ultimate success of Canada achieving nationhood. Had the outcome of that particular conflict favoured the United States, the geography of Canada would certainly be different. Given that there was indigenous support, why was there a disconnect between these allies and the rest of Canada?

After Confederation, the crown was intent on assimilating the natives of Canada into a more Eurocentric society and away from the spiritual and cultural norms and practices. Even when treaties were enacted, these actions continued. Treaties, by definition, are agreements between sovereign nations. What happened? Reserves were created, with government controls, through the development of the Indian Act. Residential schools were created to assimilate our children and youth, to outlaw native spirituality, and to replace it with Christian ideals. Included in this was the banning of all cultural practices by our peoples.

How does this actually have anything to do with our veterans? At the start of both world wars and the Korean War, indigenous warriors enrolled to fight for the crown. The number of indigenous people who enrolled and fought represented the highest percentage of any Canadian demographic. The reason for enrolment may have been as simple as getting three meals a day, a pair of boots, or a bed to sleep in. I tend to think the main reason was to show that indigenous people were willing to once again prove their steadfastness to Canada, while at the same time hoping that by serving, things would change and become better back home. In other words, it meant my service in exchange for the country recognizing my rights and respecting me as an equal.

I was honoured to be present at both the Italian campaign's and the Dieppe raid's 75th commemorations. At these, I spoke and listened to veterans who knew of indigenous warriors in their own units, some of whom are buried in these foreign lands, and some who returned after the fighting was over. At Dieppe, during a sunrise ceremony, I was witness to the emotional atmosphere of this terrible raid and the senseless loss of life suffered on that beach. On that beach, let it be known that there was a high number of first nations and Métis veterans, especially from the South Saskatchewan Regiment. Vast numbers were killed, and others were interned in POW camps until the end of the war.

● (1110)

Let's refer back to my earlier comments regarding residential schools. What about indigenous soldiers fighting overseas? How about the soldier fighting in Italy, while back at home the residential school director shows up with the police at his place and takes his five-year-old son away from his wife and takes that little boy to residential school? Think about you and your own children. What would you do? Where would you turn? In the case of that young woman, there was nowhere to turn; it was the law.

Also, on return after both wars, non-indigenous veterans were offered land grants, cut-rate loans, and other benefits, not to mention whatever Veterans Affairs had at that time for benefits. The Government of Canada used this time as another chance to disenfranchise returning indigenous veterans.

Also of note, Indian Affairs considered indigenous veterans as falling under their jurisdiction and not Veterans Affairs Canada's, with little or no benefits. I can only say that if you look, you will see that our warriors were equal in battle but discriminated against at home. This attitude has continued for many years, and even today with the recent media coverage, it still exists. In my notes, you'll see some of the most recent things that I've mentioned.

It is not the intention of our indigenous veterans to be classed alone; rather, we take pride in service to Canada and service with all Canadian veterans. With them, we stand united.

On previous appearances here at this committee, I advocated for our rural and isolated communities regarding veterans and establishing sound mechanisms for communicating with them with respect to those benefits and entitlements that they should have. The technology enjoyed by mainstream Canadians is not necessarily the norm in remote communities. Since my last appearance here over a year ago, there has been little traction towards addressing the issue of our veterans living in remote areas.

I take note that you will be looking for answers as to what the communities offer in a transition process. You must understand that in the case of first nations, the health care budgets on reserves are limited, and they cannot be expected to add care for our veterans without a direct and positive influence by the Government of Canada and in particular by Veterans Affairs. I can also say that the same issues exist in smaller communities where other indigenous veterans reside. You'll be visiting one of those on your trip.

Are the services that are being offered actually reaching out to remote communities? That is a question that is not easily answered. I have a great deal of concern regarding some of the excellent programs instituted recently by Veterans Affairs Canada, such as the education benefit and caregiver's entitlement. My concern is that communicating those benefits to remote areas or regions and offering up these incentives may very well not be reaching out far enough.

OSISS is an outstanding organization that has done excellent work. Does it, however, have the ability to do outreach to our indigenous veterans who are suffering from mental issues? Is there any way to provide outreach mental health services to rural communities too far away to access somebody in person, including the OSISS organization? What mechanisms can be instituted by Veterans Affairs Canada, in conjunction with the health care community professionals, specifically for veterans?

In other words, assuring care for entitled veterans should not become a financial burden on any community from the money received for the health of the community. Veterans Affairs must establish the same and equal support as for mainstream veterans, including any costs associated with that support.

I noted in your travel agenda that you wanted to know specific issues regarding veterans from all three of the indigenous groups in Canada.

● (1115)

The issue for some first nations veterans is that their military service may not have been with Canada but rather with the U.S. military, in other words, with an allied force. Although I understand and appreciate that the U.S. DVA holds responsibility for their benefits, there appears to be a disconnect concerning the way these veterans can access the benefits they are entitled to through the DVA hospital system.

I was informed four years ago by Chief Percy Joe from the Shackan Indian Band, a remote reserve near Merritt, B.C., that veterans had to pay out of their pockets the expenses to get from their community to the border; then they would be covered. I asked at that time whether there was a possibility of an agreement between DVA and VAC to address and resolve the issue of travel, in other words, whether there was a way that Veterans Affairs could pay that travel and be reimbursed by DVA, that is, through cross-border talks.

Concerning Inuit veterans, including veterans of the Canadian rangers, travel to remote northern communities is not included on your initial agenda. I know that the next leg of your journey will include northern Inuit communities, and this will be extremely important, for as we know, in Canada the highest suicide rates are among our indigenous peoples, and this is more the case within Inuit communities. With the announcement by VAC and DND of a suicide prevention strategy, I am hopeful that this will also include interaction with indigenous social workers, with the intention of reducing the numbers of suicide deaths, be they of veterans or not.

Regarding RCMP veterans who are receiving benefits and entitlements from VAC, my nephew, a first nations status Indian from Oromocto First Nation, has stated that he has not had any problems with Veterans Affairs or anyone he has been in contact with in that department.

Once again, I offer these words: effective communication is the cornerstone to success, for if you can communicate your message to everyone and it is understood, then you have achieved the most important step in providing care to veterans.

Mr. Chairman, committee members, and fellow veterans, thank you, *meegwetch*, *marsi*, *merci*, *qujannamiik*, all my relations.

● (1120)

The Chair: We'll begin with six minutes for Mr. McColeman.

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brantford—Brant, CPC): Chair, first of all, I want to welcome you back to the chair. It's great to see you here, Neil, and in good health. We certainly missed you.

The Chair: If I may just make a comment, thanks for filling in for me. Both of you did a great job, I hear.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Well, it's great to have you back.

Thank you for your testimony, Mr. Thibeau. First of all, I'd like to understand a little bit more of the context of your group. How many people are part of it? Do you consider it an association? Is there a formal mechanism for membership of your organization? Can you give me a general executive summary overview of the Autochtones?

Mr. Robert Thibeau: Aboriginal Veterans Autochtones forms its roots from the now-defunct National Aboriginal Veterans Association. There were two groups that started up; the carpet was yanked from under NAVA. At that time I had just been elected vice-president for NAVA, only to find that somebody had pulled a fast one and had taken it away from us. Instead of fighting this issue, we formed an organization with a French connection as well, Aboriginal Veterans Autochtones, as a national organization. The majority of the members from NAVA came with us. The other ones had either been disillusioned with what had taken place or went their own way.

We have a mission statement stating that we're looking after advocacy, remembrance, and community services. That's our job; that's our role. I have a director in each province in Canada. There's nothing in the territories as yet, but that's still being worked on. I have the ability to get that going, because of a few of our Métis people who have retired just recently.

We are a national organization. Our numbers are very close to 200. We sit and look after.... I'm on the mental health advisory group, I have somebody on the family committee with Veterans Affairs and one on policy.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Of the 200, what is the makeup? Is that actual veterans, or is it advocacy for the veterans?

Mr. Robert Thibeau: No, in order to get into AVA you have to be a veteran, and because the RCMP have now fallen under the umbrella, we've included RCMP veterans as well, and they have to be indigenous.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Okay, excellent.

Are the indigenous veterans, in your group's estimation, generally satisfied with Veterans Affairs Canada at this point in time?

Mr. Robert Thibeau: What I have made reference to is that I've sat on these boards for over four years. It's very frustrating. As I know you probably, sitting here and listening to some things, become frustrated with what you hear, I become frustrated, because I'm part of the 90% of veterans in Canada who are quite satisfied with what Veterans Affairs has done, the benefits that have come out. At almost 64 years of age, I can go back to university for four years with $80,000, because I fall under that umbrella, with the caregivers allowance and those things that have happened. Those are positive things.

I make sure that our veterans know of all of those changes that have come in, the positive things. They give me the negative things. They provide me the feedback, and I will address them in such a way.... I don't pick parties and will not pick parties, because I think that's wrong. I think this, as a committee, is a fair group, because you're all working together. As a military person I get very frustrated.

By the way, my wife is a 30-year veteran as well. She's not indigenous, but she's a 30-year veteran. She did a tour in Rwanda during the hospital deployment there. She worked at the Role 3 facility at Kandahar airfield during the height of all the casualties that Canada had and she has done extremely well. Is she being looked after? Whatever she needed from Veterans Affairs she got. No, she doesn't have PTSD. I don't know what's in Newfoundland blood.

I can tell you that on the indigenous side we listen to what the veterans have to say. We provide the information. That's the advocacy part of things. I want to take the information.... I will sit on various committees and offer up various things and will brief my directorship on some of the things we spoke about. For example, with the mental health group, when you talk about specific things within that group, agree or not agree, I give a highlight on it. Then I get feedback as well. We keep up to date; we keep working with—

● (1125)

Mr. Phil McColeman: Do you ever meet as a group nationally? Do you ever have a national conference of some sort?

Mr. Robert Thibeau: We have not had our national conference, because we have no funding, so my contact is through the Internet.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Thibeau.

Mr. Eyolfson is next, for six minutes.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia—Headingley, Lib.): Thank you for coming, Mr. Thibeau.

You were talking about issues of outreach and about our needing to get better services out to people in isolated areas in the north and, for the services that are available to them, getting the information to them. Have you any suggestions for us as to how we can do that?

Mr. Robert Thibeau: Initially when I started four years ago talking about the rangers, it was great news to me that the army had finally taken over the ranger program. That's a very unique program, and it should have been under the army because the rangers are doing army work. That gave them the ability to become and to be classed as reserve soldiers, therefore providing them with Veterans Affairs services, etc.

One of the things for communications—I worked a bit in the north visiting communities and teaching up there—is that there was already a connection up there with the military. The military travels the north quite extensively.

We have a suicide prevention program between DND and VAC. I've brought this up before. Is there a possibility for the senior NCOs or the NCOs who visit these communities to have a sit-down with the veterans of that community and talk about the benefits that Veterans Affairs has? In other words, can we design a package that you can take up north into each community? That's a start, but for that outreach, some of the communities there may not be.... There may be veterans in other communities. The army probably looks after only those communities where they have those rangers who come in, and there may be other communities out there that don't have the access.

I really get troubled when I start thinking about the Internet. I talked to a young Mohawk out there. When he was up in the north, if you got Internet, you were working on slow time, very slow time. That's if you have it. Some communities in the first nations, I believe, may not have the ability to have it, because they're so far into the remote area. If they do have it, it may be in only one location and there's a priority of use.

● (1130)

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: All right. Thank you.

This goes outside Veterans Affairs, but it definitely affects veterans. Is there any program or initiative you know of in Defence so that when indigenous service members are transitioning, it basically takes into account that they're going to isolated areas and maybe gives them some instruction beforehand, as in the challenges they're going to have where they live and how they can contact them? Is there anything like that to help them so they're prepared before they go there?

Mr. Robert Thibeau: That's a very good question to be brought up with DND, because to my knowledge there is nothing in that transition process. I'm not familiar with that. That transition period has, I think, just hit the ice now.

I know of one thing that happened in Afghanistan in terms of the ceremonies of our fallen who came back. I believe it was a young Mohawk woman from one of the reserves in Ontario who said that if she was to be killed overseas, she wanted to have her ceremony be the ceremony of her traditional people. That was marked down, and had this happened, it would have happened. I find DND very receptive to some of the ideas that we bring forward or that have been brought forward.

That stands to reason. I think if you talk to the army commander.... The army commander is the military's champion for indigenous peoples. The army has held that position for the last 10 or 15 years and they don't want to give it up because it's dear to their heart and it's part of... The majority of those people join the army. I think it's a very good question, because that forms another part of that transition.

The other thing I talked about on mental health is traditional healing. There are things that we do in our indigenous communities. I run culture camps for the military every summer, Black Bear and Raven, and for Bold Eagle I was the sergeant major for their camp in 2000 and...anyway, it was years ago.

That traditional healing aspect of things is something that I brought up and that I think is dear too. I'll give you an example: Debbie Eisan. If you've ever met Debbie Eisan from Halifax, ex-chief petty officer.... There was a problem with an individual on board ship. They had come to their wits' end and were ready to release him. They came to her, the adviser, and asked what they should do. She said to send him back to his community for two weeks and let the elders do their thing. They sent him back for two weeks of traditional therapy—the healing process—and he came back a changed individual. He stayed with the service and promoted himself through the service. There's a positive thing.

The big thing is to listen to some of the indigenous people who are in there and to veterans, elders, and all those other people. It makes a big difference.

The Chair: Thank you.

Wayne, you have six minutes.

Mr. Wayne Stetski (Kootenay—Columbia, NDP): Thank you very much for being here.

I particularly appreciated the picture you painted of the indigenous soldier being overseas while back home his son was being put in a residential school.

I had the opportunity to sit in on the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs at a time when they were looking to study a new subject. I raised a question and said that surely this subject had been studied before. It turned out that a Senate committee and a House of Commons committee had looked at the same issue. My suggestion was that maybe the committee should study the recommendations from those previous studies and see how many of them were actually implemented.

My question for you is, has this issue been looked at before? From your perspective, what were the outcomes from the previous studies, if there have been any?

● (1135)

Mr. Robert Thibeau: You know more about that than I do. For Indigenous Affairs, I know very little about the study that took place, but that said, it's quite possible that Mr. Bertrand may know.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: It was a different subject, but it was concerning to me that while some things have been studied before and great reports have been written, very little has changed as a result of those reports. It's more about the principle and, from your perspective, whether this issue that we're looking at today has been studied before and whether the outcome was beneficial in any way.

Mr. Robert Thibeau: When you look at committee work, I think you look for answers, but I think we're in a changing day and age too. For example, I know a veteran in Edmonton. He's not a big fan of indigenous treaties or anything like that, because he doesn't understand it. They don't understand that. They don't understand the residential schools, but his grandchild certainly does, because the grandchild now has been exposed to that. She's 18 now. She's been exposed to that.

Bless his heart, when she came to him and asked questions about it, he said, "Go ask Mr. Thibeau, because he'll probably have the answers." He wouldn't commit himself to any of those negative things that he may have had in his mind or that negativity that he had towards treaties, benefits, or things that the majority of Canadians don't understand.

I really think that we're in a changing society now. We're in a change, where our younger people are starting to take hold of things. That's why I have a positive feeling about the committee that I'm sitting in front of, because I think there's a great deal of the young people who are going to be pushing to get the answers and to get things right that have been wrong for so many years.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: Yes. I was very pleased to see that the committee is taking on this particular issue.

One of the comments you made was that veterans in remote areas, in small communities, are particularly challenged. Can you expand on that?

Mr. Robert Thibeau: In Beauval, Saskatchewan, where you'll be visiting, there's a major problem with.... I won't say a "major" problem because they'll give you an insight on what the problem is. They don't have the ability.... It costs them money to go from Beauval to Saskatoon to the Veterans Affairs department.

My suggestion would have been that if you've upped your workers within Veterans Affairs, why can't they go and visit these communities? Establish some sort of a network where they can go, because I've been told—they can verify it for you—that Veterans Affairs won't pay for the people to travel from Beauval to Saskatoon and back. If that's the case, that's not right, because you're dealing with a veteran who has a problem. If it's a mental health problem, you're in deeper water, because this mental health thing is not going away any time soon.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: You've mentioned mental health challenges. Of course, we hear way too often about youth suicide and the lack of mental health supports on many reserves across Canada. Now we're hearing the same thing from your perspective in terms of indigenous soldiers and mental health. It just seems to me that there's such a need. I'm very familiar with the youth aspect of mental health issues, but I really hadn't thought much about this issue you're bringing forward today in terms of indigenous soldiers.

I wonder if you could talk a bit about the general lack of mental health support on reserves and its impact on the populations that live there.

Mr. Robert Thibeau: I have an individual who has a master's in social work, and she's living in Kenora. I employ them during the summer to do my culture camps—a four-day culture camp—and in her case as a counsellor for the young students.

When you do a culture camp with a young group and listen to some of the things they've gone through in present day—not the generations before them, but in present day—about sexual abuse on a reserve, abuse on the reserve, lack of certain things on the reserve, it's very troubling.

As for the suicide rates, I believe that had the culture not been put in a delayed mode and pushed underground the way it was for so many years.... It's making a resurgence now, but it's going to take a long, long time. Elders, when they teach the young people about suicide, say you're doing something that the Creator doesn't support you on. The Creator lets you know when he wants you. If you take your own life, you are caught between the next world and the world you're in now, so you roam.

● (1140)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Samson, you have six minutes.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Thibeau, for your testimony, but also for your service. It's much appreciated.

Thank you as well, Mr. Bertrand, for being here as support and one who knows how business works here on the Hill.

I have a couple of comments to make before I go to questions.

The first one is that you made reference to the fact that indigenous people played a major role in Confederation. It's funny that you said that, because my knowledge of that was limited. However, I did spend a day in the War Museum last month. I'm sure you're aware of this, but if not, I want to share this with you. It was evident through the information provided—I was able to gather that information—but I had not been aware of the role they played and the number of indigenous people who enrolled and contributed in World War I, World War II, and the Korean War. It's quite impressive. I wanted to underline that piece first of all.

The second piece I'd like to touch on is that I'm an Acadian from Nova Scotia—L'Acadie as it was known back in the 1700s, and the indigenous peoples in my area, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and P.E.I., played a major role in helping Acadians survive: before deportation, during, and post. People don't talk about that, but I know that my Acadian colleagues and community often speak of that.

I want to thank you and your peoples again for helping us through a very difficult time—shelter, food, life, and risking your lives to help others: neighbours, colleagues and friends. That's very powerful. I want that on the record as well. I think it's very, very important.

The third one is a quick question. I have three or four questions, but this is a quick one. You mentioned how proud you were in knowing you had access to education programs up to four years, $80,000, and the caregivers allowance. Because it helps me understand, when did you find out that these programs existed, and how many people in your communities are aware of that?

Mr. Robert Thibeau: The people within my organization are aware of it but only just recently. I knew the issues were coming.

For example, on the mental health group, I knew a suicide strategy was coming. Do I agree with everything in the suicide strategy? No, I don't. I don't believe that DND or VAC should be working in isolation from Health Canada and away from professionals within the mental health world, but there's a strategy there. It's good to know that. However, as I mentioned in my talk, it's also about working with indigenous social workers and mental health professionals to make sure we're getting it. It's very sad when you hear of veterans committing suicide. It's very sad when you hear of anybody committing suicide, but it's astonishing when you hear the numbers of indigenous youth who are committing suicide.

When we first started talking about this, I was getting a little frustrated because suicide prevention never seemed to hit the table anywhere until veterans started committing suicide. I'm thinking to myself, it's been a known fact here for years that the indigenous population has the highest rate of suicide, and in the Inuit community it may be the highest in the world. Here we are. That's why I'm hopeful it's going to take.

● (1145)

Mr. Darrell Samson: When an activist, as you are, sharing knowledge and skills and whatnot is only aware now, we need to do a better job in this. Your being an indigenous veteran, your wife being a veteran but not indigenous, can you draw some parallels with those who returned from World War I or World War II? You didn't touch on that. Of course, you weren't there. Perhaps you could draw a very quick picture for the committee of a veteran, your wife being non-indigenous and you being indigenous regarding benefits that would have come or not come to each of you.

Mr. Robert Thibeau: The fortunate aspect of it is that when Rose came back....

Mr. Darrell Samson: That's your wife.

Mr. Robert Thibeau: Yes.

When she came back from Bosnia, she had to transport a casualty by helicopter from the field to the hospital in Sarajevo so he could get an MRI or something. When she went to Sarajevo, her back was bad. The doctor told her to get an MRI. Her back was worse than the casualty's. This is after she carried the stretcher in and out of the hospital.

When she had to apply for the pension, there was no issue. I have two vertebrae broken in my back from parachuting—my knee, shoulder. Those things were looked after completely. But I was never in a remote community or a rural area where I didn't have first-hand access to those benefits or the people.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Thibeau.

The Chair: Ms. Lambropoulos.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos (Saint-Laurent, Lib.): Mr. Thibeau and Monsieur Bertrand, thank you for being with us today.

We know that in rural communities, it's more difficult to get services, obviously. Would you say there are other issues that are not about where you're located that make it more difficult for indigenous members of the CAF or of VAC to receive services later on or is it fairly equal other than the fact that they may live further away?

Mr. Robert Thibeau: Again, there's the communication aspect of it. The people who are further away may not get the communication of the benefits that are there but across the board, everywhere indigenous or not, if you're close to a major centre, you're going to be able to get it.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: You mentioned a few times that communication is key, and that would make everything a lot more successful. Can you give us some recommendations? You mentioned maybe helping people financially to get to locations. Is there anything else you would recommend to the government to ease communication or outreach to rural communities?

Mr. Robert Thibeau: If you could get them all a computer.... No, I'm kidding.

Mr. Darrell Samson: And the Internet to go with it.

Mr. Robert Thibeau: The critical part is the Inuit communities that are away from the normal major centres. I don't even know if VAC has an office up in Inuvik or Yellowknife. I'm not sure. If it doesn't, then that's probably a good start to looking after veterans.

Again, for up north, anybody who's in the northern reaches of the provinces doesn't have that ability to get in. If you live in some fly-in communities, how do you get to a Veterans Affairs office to talk about benefits?

The computer, yes, if you have the computer system, if you have the ability to do that, but again it's hit and miss.

It's a major problem, and my answer to it is to have somebody visit the community, face to face. The best thing about a face-to-face visit is that you're there on a mission and you have a job to do when you go in, but you're also learning something about another culture and another community. You get to see first-hand some of the things you can bring back and maybe try to influence.

● (1150)

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Since you are an advocate for indigenous veterans and members who are serving, what are the most common issues that people come to you for? What do people have the most difficulty with when receiving services, other than the fact that they're away?

Mr. Robert Thibeau: That is the major critical one, the distance. We still have a couple of Korean vets and an Italian campaign vet. They're well into their nineties. It's very hard for them to travel.

That's the critical side of things. It's not being able to access.... Even if they had a computer, they probably wouldn't understand the mechanism of the computer. If there were somebody in the community who could help.... With some of the mental health things that are going on, when the strategy comes out, maybe there's a connection that can be made within the community itself, along with those professionals who are in there.

That's the major point, the distance between them and where that office is. Once they get to the office, then they're like anybody else. They walk in the door and they sit with somebody and go through the process. It's getting to the door.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: That's definitely going to be one of our recommendations at the end of this report. I just wanted to know if there was something else you would like to add.

Mr. Robert Thibeau: I think you're going to be speaking to some veterans out there. For example, Joe Grey-Thorne will be in Victoria, and Alex Maurice, and that will probably be one of the most interesting talks that you'll have.

Also, there's Debbie Eisan in Halifax. When you speak to Debbie, you will find she knows everything that's going on within Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and P.E.I. She's the only Ojibwa lady, elder, who's been adopted by the Mi'kmaq in Nova Scotia. That's pretty high praise for her. She works very well for veterans.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Wagantall.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Chair, first all, it's good to have you here again.

I'm catching up. I was not here for our last meeting, and we had representatives from Saskatchewan here talking about issues, and that's my home province. Isolation and rural issues are huge across the board for us there. You can appreciate that, right?

As far as veterans go, I'm just beginning to find many veterans in our province who you don't know are there. Part of the issue is communication. You talked about effective communication, and that's what we need.

Do you know Grand Chief Steven Ross from the Saskatchewan First Nations Veterans Association?

Mr. Robert Thibeau: No, but I know he's part of First Nations Veterans of Canada, and I know that Chief Percy Joe is part of that organization as well.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay.

I look at these and there seems to be a disconnect on a number of fronts. When I think of our rural population and the role that you and your organization play, I see it almost—and I may be wrong here—as though the Legion is, in many ways, for others what you are for first nations. Would that be comparable?

● (1155)

Mr. Robert Thibeau: No, it's first nations, Métis, and Inuit, so indigenous.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: It's for indigenous. Okay, sorry.

In communicating with chiefs and councils in Saskatchewan, we hear that there is a disconnect, even within first nations reserves, with regard to knowing what's available for their veterans or working with their veterans to connect with organizations like yours or with the Saskatchewan First Nations Veterans' Association to get that information.

The Legion has service managers who work on communicating. Is that something you would see as valuable if VAC were to equip your organizations with that communications tool?

Mr. Robert Thibeau: It could work. The Legion has service officers. If you're lucky and fortunate, you have a service officer who has actually served and who understands what the benefits are and understands everything else that Veterans Affairs offers. Some do, some don't. The majority of them, I hope, do.

The Legion is a fallback. We support the Legion as well, and they support us.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: That's a good thing.

The whole question, though, is that you're saying there isn't that connection and you're suggesting it needs to be an individual from VAC who makes the effort to actually go face to face with these individuals and do the travel. I know that in terms of the issues you're talking about, in rural Saskatchewan, even veterans who are not part of the indigenous community have exactly the same issues. They have to pay to travel, to go to Saskatoon or to Regina. They may be reimbursed, but that's a process in itself, and then it's out of pocket for a lot of people who cannot afford that out-of-pocket expense in the first place.

That used to be different, so I don't know....

Mr. Robert Thibeau: You're absolutely right. It's not only the indigenous veterans who are in some of these areas, but I would say the percentage is higher in the indigenous communities than anywhere else. It's like a Newfoundlander wanting to go back home to the little community where she is from, and there is nothing there. In order to access those benefits in Newfoundland, she has to go to St. John's.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Right.

I've noticed in my riding that a significant portion of our cadets and our reservists are first nations indigenous people. What do you think is the motivation in that?

Mr. Robert Thibeau: For Saskatchewan, probably the best answer I can give you is Bold Eagle. The Bold Eagle program is now almost 30 years old. It's the Cadillac of the three indigenous programs they run. It's a six-week program for basic military qualification. It is very well supported by all of the chiefs in Saskatchewan. It started off as a Saskatchewan initiative and then spread to western Canada.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: A lot of things happen that way.

Mr. Robert Thibeau: Oh, yes.

It started with maybe 30 or 40 kids. When General Leslie was the army commander, he pushed that. I think they're up to about 120 each summer. The difference is that the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations pays for the cultural side of things in the program.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you. That's excellent.

You mentioned your cultural camps. Are they available in Saskatchewan as well?

Mr. Robert Thibeau: At Bold Eagle they are.

I attended theirs. They do the same thing, and that's why, when I got out and decided to offer that when the new programs came in, that was the starting point.

I don't teach it. I'm a teacher. I know a lot about indigenous.... I can educate anybody, but I need traditional elders to teach the traditional culture, and they do it extremely well.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I hope we get to talk again.

Thank you.

The Chair: We'll end this round with Mr. Fraser. He has one question and then we'll get the next group in.

Mr. Colin Fraser (West Nova, Lib.): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, gentlemen, for being here.

Mr. Thibeau, I have a question relating to engagement of families in indigenous situations. In the last study we did on barriers to transition, we heard over and over again, as a theme throughout our work at committee, about the importance of engaging family members to support veterans.

Is there anything specific you could recommend that would help engage families of indigenous veterans and that's not happening right now?

● (1200)

Mr. Robert Thibeau: I'll go back to my culture camps, because for some indigenous people—not all—there's a great deal of emphasis that they place on their culture.

You have somebody standing at the door going out from the military, somebody who spent 20 years, 25 years, or whatever, and he walks out the door. He may have had his wife at the SCAN seminar, but the SCAN seminar doesn't touch anything about culture.

The first time I ran a sweat lodge in Borden, I had two young infantry corporals from the RCR, and believe it or not, one was Palestinian and the other one was Iraqi. I couldn't believe it, but they were my storemen and they were looking after the troops. They had watched what was going on with the elders and the students, and the day the sweat lodge came, they came up to me and asked if they could do the sweat lodge, too. I said yes, by all means.

Those two guys were exposed to having their friends killed in Afghanistan. They were on the front lines in Afghanistan, and they had lost some close friends. The first guy got out of that sweat lodge and he had tears in his eyes when he came over, and he thanked me for allowing him to go in there. He said he had never experienced anything like it in his life.

The second guy came out, and he said he didn't know what was going on in there but before the door was closed, he felt people moving around him. And he said nobody was there. Everybody was inside. So I told him to go talk to the elder. I didn't want to get involved in that.

In Yakima, Washington, they have a week of culture camp, where they take veterans and their families. What my culture camp is designed for is to ground people back to mother earth. If somebody invites you to a sweat lodge and the sweat lodge is already built, what have you learned? Zero. The only thing you learned was what took place inside the sweat lodge. A veteran down in Washington state was having major problems with PTSD, and he went back to his community under the guidance of his elder. His elder had him for four days. They talked. He cut wood. He cut the wood that was going to be used to construct a sweat lodge. They went through the teachings, understood everything to do with the sweat lodge.

It's not the fact of going to a sweat lodge. It's the fact of going out, understanding what mother earth is all about, leaving the cellphones, leaving the computers, leaving all those things that are negative and that take away from what it is.

Is there a culture? A promising thing that can be done, if the will is there, is to have these indigenous people and their families...because the family has been side by side through everything that has gone on. Maybe there was only one family member deployed, maybe two were deployed. This includes the children. Everybody is affected by what that service was.

Mr. Colin Fraser: Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you, and that, unfortunately, ends our time for today.

On behalf of the committee, Mr. Thibeau and Mr. Bertrand, I'd like to thank both of you, and if there's anything else that you can add to help us in our journey of travel, please give that information to our clerk and she will give it to the committee.

Again, thank you very much, both of you.

We'll pause for a minute to bring in our next panel.

● _____ (Pause) _____ ●

● (1210)

The Chair: I'd like to welcome to the committee Brigadier-General Paul, Chief of Staff of Canadian Forces Intelligence Command; Colonel Mackay, Director of Army Reserve; Warrant Officer Greyeyes, Aboriginal Adviser to Commander, Canadian Army; and Warrant Officer Tetrault-Hamel, indigenous adviser to the chaplain general.

Welcome today.

We're going to start with Brigadier-General Paul.

Thank you for coming today.

Brigadier-General J.J.M.J. Paul (Chief of Staff, Canadian Forces Intelligence Command, Department of National Defence): Mr. Chair, and committee members, I am Brigadier-General Joe Paul, Jocelyn Paul.

I joined the Canadian Forces in 1988. I was born and raised on the Indian reserve of Wendake, just north of Quebec City. I am a status Indian and I am also a member of the Huron-Wendat Nation.

I would like to offer my colleagues the opportunity to tell you where they are from and what's their background.

Master Warrant Officer Grant Greyeyes (Aboriginal Advisor to Commander, Canadian Army, Department of National Defence): Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Grant Greyeyes. I'm a master warrant officer in the Canadian Armed Forces. I am the indigenous adviser to the commander of the Canadian Army, who is the champion for indigenous peoples within the Canadian Armed Forces and the defence team. I come from the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation, Saskatchewan, and I've been in the military for 35 years.

Warrant Officer Moogly Tetrault-Hamel (Indigenous Advisor to the Chaplain General, Department of National Defence): I'm Warrant Officer Tetrault-Hamel. I'm the indigenous adviser to the chaplain general within the Canadian Armed Forces. I've been in the military for going on 18 years and I am a member of the Abenaki Nation.

Colonel T.E.C. Mackay (Director, Army Reserve, Department of National Defence): Good day, my name is Colonel Thomas Mackay, Director, Army Reserve. I'm a primary reservist and an infantry officer. I've been serving for 27 years. My responsibility is to be a subject-matter expert adviser within National Defence headquarters on reserve issues, both primary reserve and Canadian rangers.

BGen J.J.M.J. Paul: As was mentioned, I'm here on behalf of the commander of the Canadian Army, Lieutenant-General Wynnyk.

[*Translation*]

Lieutenant-General Wynnyk is the champion for indigenous peoples. In his role in the Canadian Armed Forces and the Department of National Defence, he encourages indigenous peoples to consider pursuing a career with the department and the Canadian Armed Forces, or the CAF.

In order to achieve his mandate, the Commander of the Canadian Army invests himself in the employment equity cause, by fostering a representative and equitable workforce and a welcoming workplace for indigenous peoples. He contributes to the corporate culture change and promotes different indigenous programs offered by the Department of National Defence, or DND, and the CAF. To help him with his mandate, our commander is supported by an aboriginal advisory group. Two of those advisers are present with us today.

[*English*]

We noted the indigenous culture within the Canadian Armed Forces. To achieve our indigenous representation target of 3.5%, we are actively engaging indigenous communities where we know the population is much younger than the national average. In the context of an aging population, you have to keep in mind that for operational purposes this is extremely important for us.

Furthermore, we have developed over the last few years numerous training programs for our personnel. There are five different programs that were specifically created for the indigenous population of Canada. Our oldest program is the Canadian Forces aboriginal entry program, introduced in 1997. This is a pre-enrolment program that provides a limited experience of military service to the participants. It is essentially a pre-recruit training course that includes military training, physical fitness training, and career guidance. If successful, the candidates, the graduates, are offered the opportunity to enrol in the Canadian Armed Forces. This program is offered three times a year. Two serials are conducted in Saint-Jean, Quebec, and there's an additional one conducted at the naval fleet school in Halifax.

[*Translation*]

The second program is the aboriginal leadership opportunity year, known as ALOY.

[*English*]

we refer to it as the ALOY.

● (1215)

[*Translation*]

The ALOY was first offered in 2008 at the Royal Military College of Canada, in Kingston, Ontario. Participants are enrolled for one year as officer cadets and given a highly positive educational and leadership experience. The program is based on four pillars: academics, military, physical fitness, and culture. At the end of the year, ALOY officer cadets are granted the equivalent to basic military officer qualification and they may apply to continue at the college.

[*English*]

The Canadian Armed Forces have also implemented three summer programs at the end of which young indigenous people may join the army or the navy primary reserve. These programs are offered in the east, the west, and on the Pacific coast.

The first one and probably the most well known is Bold Eagle. It is designed for indigenous youth from western Canada and was first conducted in 1989. This course is offered every summer at Canadian Forces Base Wainwright in Alberta. The second summer program we offer was first conducted in 2003, and it is led by the Royal Canadian Navy. Named Raven, it is offered every year at the Naval Fleet School Pacific, in Esquimalt, British Columbia. The third summer program we have is named Black Bear. It was first conducted in 2009. This program is led by the Canadian Army, and it's being delivered every year during the summer at Canadian Forces Base Gagetown in New Brunswick.

We have had so much success over the last few years with these three programs that the Canadian Army is planning on creating two new, similar programs in Quebec and Ontario. We're aiming at starting in 2019.

Now I'm going to talk a little more personally at this point.

Over the last 30 years, I've seen a lot of positive change in terms of indigenous cultural awareness within the Canadian Armed Forces and the department.

[*Translation*]

We can certainly look at indigenous communities as a pool of recruits, but they have so much more to offer, in terms of their potential and contribution.

Against the backdrop of an aging population, I see indigenous communities as a pool of recruits that the Canadian Armed Forces cannot ignore, especially given the serious economic and social challenges many communities face, remote ones in particular. To my mind, it is an extremely beneficial union, both for candidates and these young men and women.

[*English*]

When I am addressing the new graduates on any indigenous program, I always like to talk about how they will grow personally but also professionally by joining our institution. The personal, leadership, and technical skills they will be acquiring will enhance their communities when they go back to them.

The other idea I like to convey all the time is that when you join the Canadian Armed Forces you're gaining two extended families. Personally, I'm very closely tied to my family back on the reserve, but I do see that as a great opportunity to have the second family, the Royal 22nd Regiment family, the army family, the CAF family, that I can relate to. I can always tap into both, depending on my personal needs. Actually, I would offer to you that after close to 30 years of service, half my friends are the people back in the community and the other half are the people back in the CAF. It has been a privilege to serve in uniform.

For all of us here at the table, every single time we go to Saint-Jean or to Wainwright to address these young men and women who are going through these summer programs, we always like to give them a bit of encouragement. We like to showcase ourselves as a success story, if I can say that. Very often these young men and women only need that little additional push to join because, let's be honest, to join the CAF is something that can be a bit intimidating.

The other aspect I like very much about our indigenous program as well is the cultural aspect of it. A lot of our youth are struggling with their own personal identity. Who are they? Where do they fit? Many of these young men and women, even some of those who were born and raised on the reserve, do struggle with their personal identity. Built into this program we always have that cultural component.

A lot of our youth can sometimes have a real interaction with an elder, when they are signing up for the first time or when they are undergoing this program. A lot of our communities have been extremely Christianized. My community was Christianized three centuries ago. A lot of our traditional knowledge has disappeared over the last generations so very often our people are first introduced to traditional ideas and concepts when they go through these programs. In that regard, I would like to highlight that our elders are doing a fantastic job.

● (1220)

[*Translation*]

Another important aspect of this program relates to self-esteem. Earlier, I mentioned social and economic challenges, but challenges also exist around identity. Joining the ranks of the Canadian Armed Forces often helps give youth another view of their indigenous identity. It helps put a much more positive spin, if you will, on a potentially negative view of their identity.

I would also like to highlight for the committee members how diverse indigenous communities are. We hear a lot about how diverse Canada is, as a whole, but one-size-fits-all solutions and policies will not work for aboriginal communities.

Communities in eastern Canada were in contact with the first Europeans to come here more than 300 years ago. Communities in the Arctic met the first Canadians about 75 years ago. Some communities still commonly speak their aboriginal languages, while others have lost their languages completely.

Some communities live in urban settings. My community was in the middle of the forest when the Jesuits founded it some 300 years ago. Quebec City joined us, if you will recall. Communities became settlement-based about a half-century ago, and indigenous peoples started leaving their communities for cities. As you can appreciate, then, our communities are extremely diverse.

I would like to conclude by pointing out that all of the programs in place share the aim of building bridges between indigenous communities and the Canadian Armed Forces, so that indigenous peoples feel encouraged to pursue a career in the CAF.

[*English*]

Guided by the indigenous people in uniform, mentored by our elders, inspired by our ancestors who have always defended this country, and supported by all the members of the Canadian Armed Forces, we hope we can guide and reassure these young men and women who are about to embrace a unique and demanding career.

Thank you for inviting us to appear today. It's much appreciated. We are here to answer any questions you may have. I would like to highlight that any question specific to the ranger program should be directed to Colonel Mackay.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for your testimony.

We'll start our five-minute rounds with Mr. Kitchen.

Mr. Robert Kitchen (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

General, Colonel, Master Warrant Officer, thank you for your service, and thank you for being here today to discuss this important issue with us.

General, you talked about family, and we've talked many times in committee about family in the military. I come from a military family. I grew up and lived for many years on bases around the world travelling with my father, so I consider myself to be part of that family, having been an officer cadet with the PPCLI, and my brother and sister as well.... Many in this room have family in the military. That's an important aspect to indigenous life as well, as you mentioned.

I'm wondering if you can expand on some of those comments about how you integrate in the forces. Do you educate in the sense of providing indigenous cultural training to all members of the forces such that when they encounter that, they're aware of those aspects and hope to blend with the forces?

BGen J.J.M.J. Paul: I'm going to offer you a general comment, and then maybe Master Warrant Officer Greyeyes can jump in.

Right now, we do have a lot of cultural awareness programs within the CAF. I don't think it's being offered to everybody; it's one aspect of it.

The other aspect that is extremely important is education on the other side; i.e., on many occasions I ended up sitting down with parents who were having doubts about letting their young men or young women join the service. Those of us in uniform who are aboriginal, when it comes down to recruiting, we can also educate many parents about what is waiting for their children who are about to sign up.

Yes, we do have some programs in place, and once again, Officer Greyeyes can expand on it.

The last point I would like to offer is that these programs were in existence when I signed up 30 years ago. I've seen huge progress. When I signed up, I wasn't really vocal about who I was. People knew I was a status Indian because I still lived on the reserve. The reserve is right next to Valcartier. But it's not something that I was speaking out loud about; let's be honest. Nowadays, it's much better perceived.

Every time we're running a Bold Eagle or a Black Bear program, there's a bunch of instructors. These instructors very often are non-aboriginal, so they themselves are being introduced to the aboriginal culture, and there's a domino effect. These instructors are very often sergeants, warrant officers, and captains, people who still have 15 to 20 years to go in their career. I like to see that as extremely positive. I've seen a bunch of Van Doos instructing in these programs who came out of it saying or thinking, that's not what they were thinking of. It was a discovery for them.

● (1225)

MWO Grant Greyeyes: Thank you, sir.

There is a formal program conducted for indigenous awareness training within the Canadian Armed Forces. The functional authority for that is the military personnel generation, which used to be known as the Canadian Defence Academy. They are the ones that direct anyone within the Canadian Armed Forces to take the formalized indigenous awareness training.

The reason they do this training is to create awareness for leadership to learn about the indigenous cultures within Canada. The other reason is for all instructors or personnel who work with the programs that were described by General Paul—Bold Eagle, Raven, Black Bear, ALOY, CFAEP—to have to participate in aboriginal awareness training so they are more culturally aware of the candidates on the program. It is very important that they do that so they know who they're talking to, and in some cases how to talk to the personnel they're teaching or working with. That's the formal part of indigenous awareness training within the Canadian Armed Forces and the functional authority.

The other part, with the defence aboriginal advisory group and the informal aspect, is creating that awareness amongst our members. Current serving members within the Canadian Armed Forces, and within DND—the civilian aspect of the defence team—come in, and they have no outreach to the communities. However, they create within the Canadian Armed Forces bases a conduit to the culture for them. The defence aboriginal advisory group will provide links to the community, or right inside the DAG itself will help with teachings and create the cultural awareness that's required for members, and for families if required.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Fraser, for five minutes.

Mr. Colin Fraser: Mr. Chair, I'll be sharing part of my time with Mr. Erskine-Smith.

[*Translation*]

My sincere thanks to all of you for being here and providing your input. Thank you as well for your service to the country. It is certainly very much appreciated.

You said that your goal was to achieve an indigenous representation target of 3.5%.

What is the current percentage of indigenous CAF members?

BGen J.J.M.J. Paul: As of March, it was 2.7%, if I'm not mistaken. It varies based on release and enrolment numbers.

Mr. Colin Fraser: Has the percentage gone up as a result of the programs you mentioned?

BGen J.J.M.J. Paul: I don't have the figures on hand.

I'm not sure whether a member of the team knows the answer.

Yes. We can do that. We can provide you with the exact figures.

Mr. Colin Fraser: If you find the answer, could you kindly send the information to the committee?

● (1230)

Thank you.

[*English*]

I'm wondering about this as well. In the previous panel, we had somebody representing indigenous veterans. This being the veterans affairs committee, I'm wondering if you can shed some light on any engagement that the Canadian Forces has with indigenous veterans as part of recruitment, or any co-operation you have with that community that could be of assistance to what you're trying to achieve with your goal.

MWO Grant Greyeyes: As indigenous advisers within the Canadian Armed Forces, we reach out to everybody we can to assist with recruiting. We have indigenous advisers within the Canadian Forces recruiting group itself: me, Warrant Officer Tetrault-Hamel, and there are others within the military personnel generation. We reach out not just to recruitment, but we also ask veterans organizations to assist us. We ask tribal councils to assist us.

On your question specifically and whether we reach out to the veterans organizations, the answer is yes. Bold Eagle has a management committee, and veterans are specifically a part of that.

Mr. Colin Fraser: As far as recruitment goes, I know the cadets program plays an important role in Canada as far as introducing perhaps young people to the Canadian Forces or the reserves.

Is there any kind of programming for the cadets that deals specifically with indigenous youth?

Col T.E.C. Mackay: Sir, within the Canadian rangers program, we have the junior Canadian ranger program, which is a youth program. It's not exclusive to indigenous cultures, but certainly a good percentage of the participants are indigenous. It's very similar to cadets. It is a youth program, and there is a cultural component to it.

Mr. Colin Fraser: Thank you very much.

I'll give the rest of my time to Mr. Erskine-Smith.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Thank you very much for being here.

I just have two questions.

My first question is in relation to the transitional period as people are leaving the forces to be veterans. Presumably there's a hand-off and Veterans Affairs is then responsible for providing support programs. For service people to know the programs that are available to them and to be able to have a successful transition, though, what's your role and specifically what work is done to that end?

BGen J.J.M.J. Paul: The programs that are in place, obviously, are serving every Canadian Forces member who is retiring, whichever background they may be coming from.

The aspect, though, that really has attracted my attention lately is that some of these services are not really available when you're from a remote community. When I was commanding in western Canada in Wainwright, some of my veterans were not aboriginal but their case managers were in Calgary, Edmonton, and so on and so forth. If, however, you're coming from northern Quebec or northern Alberta, whether you are a native or non-native individual, the distance might be an issue.

It is extremely important for us, when we are in uniform, to insist that our members will be reaching out and making contact. Personally, when I was a commanding officer, I was always ensuring that the connection had been made. However, when they transit into the system of Veterans Affairs, they are moving away from the CAF, obviously.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: You have a number of programs in place. To what extent are you seeking feedback from indigenous members to understand what's working and what isn't working and if there are suggestions you can then build into what you are doing?

BGen J.J.M.J. Paul: The program is being delivered by aboriginal and non-aboriginal people. Obviously, since we have elders on these programs, they can tweak the program. They have a lot of experience, obviously.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: Is there a formal survey process?

BGen J.J.M.J. Paul: That I wouldn't know.

Maybe, MWO, you know.

The Chair: Be very quick.

MWO Grant Greyeyes: For the entry programs that were introduced, yes, the training establishment has conducted an exit survey.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Mr. Stetski, you have five minutes.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: Thank you for being here today and for your service, as well.

You mentioned currently there is 2.7% of the 3.5% target. What percentage of that is indigenous women, and are there any special efforts being made to recruit more indigenous women?

BGen J.J.M.J. Paul: Again, I don't have that specific number. We'll get back to you with the number.

What you need to understand is that this is all about self-declaration and self-identification. You may be an aboriginal or a first nations member, but if you don't self-identify, it's very difficult for us to track who is who. That's why I would offer that you have to take that number with a grain of salt.

Based on my personal experience, I really believe there are a lot of people, either Métis or non-status or status Indian, who are simply not self-declaring. In terms of numbers, my instinct would be to believe that they are probably higher than what is being officially reported. Again, I don't have the hard data for you, ladies and gentlemen.

● (1235)

Mr. Wayne Stetski: Are there are no programs specifically to encourage indigenous women to become part of the forces?

BGen J.J.M.J. Paul: There is a huge emphasis right now on recruiting women. It is, as far as I know, focused specifically on women at large. I'm not tracking any indigenous women-specific programs.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: You have three very successful programs, Bold Eagle in Alberta, Raven from Esquimalt, and Black Bear from New Brunswick. Has there been any thought given to establishing a camp up north that may be more relevant to Inuit people becoming part of it?

MWO Grant Greyeyes: Ideas of this nature have been talked about. A lot of the facilities that are required to conduct the training are based heavily on the location of the Canadian Forces base where they are at. All the requirements, so logistical, training areas, and everything that's required to conduct this basic military qualification —and it is a qualification—are surrounded by a training establishment, which we don't have firmly in the north. Although we have training establishments, they're not to the level where we can conduct a course yet.

BGen J.J.M.J. Paul: From a training perspective, we always need to ensure that everybody graduating is up to the standards. We don't want to end up in a situation where young aboriginals are showing up at our regular army units or reserve units, where the people would have the feeling that the training they got was not identical to the training of everybody else. That would be a bit of a challenge for these young men and women.

I spoke to a lot of these youth and to many Inuit. What I've heard, as well, is that for many of these people, it's part of the experience. Go south. Live in the south for a few weeks or months. Be introduced to the big city. A lot of these young men and women are going south for the first time. There are pros and cons, I guess.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: Right.

I had been thinking about Churchill, which is my hometown. It's not quite Inuit, but it has a long military history, of course, with the U.S. Army being there.

We travelled to Washington last June to look at the benefits American vets get versus what Canadian vets get. One of the statistics we heard, which was quite disturbing, was that the highest suicide rate is among returning Vietnam vets. This may not be your area, but we are looking at indigenous veterans as part of this.

The reason there was such a high rate among Vietnam vets is that when they returned, not only were there potentially PTSD problems, but they were not appreciated. Their service was not appreciated, because the Vietnam War was not thought of in a very positive way.

I'm wondering whether you've heard about or experienced aboriginal vets feeling the same way upon their return from serving with our armed forces.

BGen J.J.M.J. Paul: I can offer you my personal experience. I commanded a battle group in Kandahar in 2009. There were 1,300 men and women under my command. When I came back from Kandahar, during that summer, my band council organized a ceremony on my behalf. I was handed an eagle feather by the chief of my band council. All the elders who had seen me growing up in my community were there. It was extremely warm and extremely supportive.

Obviously, everybody might have different opinions. There's a good story that MWO Greyeyes may want to share with you, the one we discussed this morning.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: Just quickly, it sounds as if World War I and World War II indigenous veterans probably did not feel so appreciated, but it's a much better situation today. Is that correct?

BGen J.J.M.J. Paul: What I lived was very positive, but again, I'm just one case among many.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Lambropoulos.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Thanks for being here today.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for helping us with our study.

We have met with numerous indigenous witnesses who said they find the Canadian Forces to be a very egalitarian environment where they feel valued. Creating an environment where people feel they will be respected and treated as equal is also a good way to encourage people to join the forces.

At the same time, we are seeing that, when people leave the armed forces, certain populations face barriers that others don't. Indigenous peoples often face barriers that members of the general Canadian population don't.

If the goal really is to increase the percentage of indigenous peoples who join the forces, it's important to also examine the consequences they face when they leave the forces.

You said that the culture in the forces was quite well integrated and that people were very open to doing things differently in order to be more inclusive. What do you do to make sure that continues and that everyone's rights are respected when they leave the military?

● (1240)

BGen J.J.M.J. Paul: When our members leave the military, clearly, they are entitled to all the programs Veterans Affairs Canada has put in place. As I mentioned in my opening statement, I like to see that young men and women have gained the skills and experience that will help them transition to civilian life.

That said, it's important to keep in mind that members who come from remote communities may not have very many employment opportunities in those communities. The job prospects are slim for non-indigenous and indigenous people alike.

My wife is originally from the north shore of Quebec; she is Montagnais, Innu. The economic situation on the north shore is tough for members of both communities. When our people leave the military, they have an easier time accessing Veterans Affairs Canada's programs and services when they choose to live in cities. The reality is that the closer they live to a city, the more accessible those supports are.

[*English*]

Would you like to add something at this point?

MWO Grant Greyeyes: Not over and above that, sir, no.

[*Translation*]

WO Moogly Tetrault-Hamel: The relationship between indigenous CAF members and our veterans is extremely important.

During my career, that relationship with local indigenous veterans has helped me a lot, and I've even wondered whether I would still be here had it not been for them. They have experienced the same challenges we face. They are like our traditional elders from a military standpoint. Therefore, this relationship is crucial and, I believe, benefits both groups, veterans and active members alike.

[*English*]

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: As I was just getting at, obviously, if we have advisers from indigenous communities advising the armed forces, then the same thing for Veterans Affairs would facilitate services and make it better for people who are retiring from the forces.

Thank you very much for everything that you do. I'm going to pass my time on to Mr. Erskine-Smith.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: I have only one other question.

You've indicated a number of different programs, but I don't see the spaces allocated for those programs and the number of people who go through those programs. Do you have the number of people served through those programs on an annual basis?

BGen J.J.M.J. Paul: I don't have it at hand, but we can—

MWO Grant Greyeyes: On an annual basis? Yes, sir.

For the summer programs, Bold Eagle is jumping from 110 to 150 this summer. For Black Bear and Raven, we're trying to populate them up to 60 personnel attending. For the Canadian Armed Forces aboriginal entry program, they have an allocation of 30 positions. However, they have not been able to populate those programs to full capacity.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: What's the deficiency, roughly?

MWO Grant Greyeyes: One course only had eight candidates.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: Okay. Do they have leadership opportunity here?

MWO Grant Greyeyes: They have 30 positions, and last year they had 26.

The Chair: For the next five minutes, it's Mr. Samson.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you very much for your input and your service in the forces. We are grateful.

You've definitely given us a great perspective in terms of what we are looking for. Our focus isn't simply veterans, but, rather, indigenous veterans. That's the reason for our study.

Mr. Paul, you said that significant strides had been made over the past 30 years. I don't doubt that. Considerable efforts and energy have been harnessed, and we've seen a real synergy.

I nevertheless have a question. The experience of indigenous veterans, who supported their people and their communities, particularly those coming back from World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and other conflicts, is probably more on the negative side. They were not treated with respect, so the need for education is clear. These people play a pivotal role.

Have you taken any steps in that regard? Although you've come a long way in 30 years, if you go back in time, things were pretty negative. What can we do to make things easier? That effort could also have a beneficial impact on recruitment today.

● (1245)

BGen J.J.M.J. Paul: You are absolutely right, sir.

If young people from the community join the forces and have a very bad experience, they will talk about it when they return to the reserve or community. It can have a serious domino effect, because communities are very close-knit.

That is precisely why we have all of these indigenous culture awareness programs in the Canadian Forces. They help ensure that people in training are treated properly.

As far as speaking with older members goes, I would say that is the role of all of us who wear the Canadian Forces uniform; we have a duty to reach out to young community members. When we can have indigenous recruiters, it makes our job that much easier.

To be perfectly frank, I will say that, regardless of race or ethnic background, not everyone leaves the Canadian Forces on a positive note. Some people struggle with life in the military. Not everyone is suited to the military. People can leave with a bitter taste in their mouth because a career in the military was not necessarily what they were expecting. There is no denying the fact that the military is not for everyone.

That said, those of us who have done well make sure to stay in contact with the communities we come from. When an indigenous person talks about their experience, it carries a lot more weight.

Mr. Darrell Samson: That's very appreciated.

What I wonder about and what concerns me has to do with the follow-up.

We're talking about members of a minority, similar to Acadians, Blacks, and so forth. As I see it, the programs aimed at these groups really have to be tailored to their needs, so I commend you for that.

It would be useful to know whether more people in the regions are taking an interest in the forces. It would also be useful to know the results of these programs. For instance, how many participants in a particular program do not want to return to the forces?

I'd really like some detailed information in terms of results. That would help us make the military a more appealing option and an even better experience for both the army and the indigenous community.

Would you care to comment on that?

BGen J.J.M.J. Paul: We might have to do a bit of digging to see whether any surveys had been done of people who had opted not to continue. Bits of information of that nature may be available.

[*English*]

I'm not sure if we have done that in a systematic way to try to figure out ways people have been retiring or leaving some of the programs. Do we have any specifics or any statistics on that?

MWO Grant Greyeyes: Do you mean for not joining the Canadian Armed Forces programs?

Mr. Darrell Samson: Yes, or for not continuing after accessing some of these programs.

MWO Grant Greyeyes: It has to do with community involvement and how the young members are recruited. It is not always through the Canadian Forces recruiting system. As a matter of fact, a small percentage go through the recruiting system. A lot of it is done by former members who have participated in Bold Eagle, Black Bear, and Raven. It has become a household name in western Canada. To have Bold Eagle on your resumé is a point of success in your life. You don't necessarily have to join the military to have that.

● (1250)

Mr. Darrell Samson: I appreciate that, but I would like to see more specific data. I come from that environment of minorities. I was superintendent of all the French schools in Nova Scotia, and when any child left our system, the parents and the child had an opportunity to tell us in a survey why they decided to leave and what more we could have done to enrich that opportunity.

Right now we are focused on indigenous veterans. A veteran is a veteran, and our expectations are the same, and I agree 100% with all that. I'm just looking at how we could maybe enhance that opportunity.

The Chair: Thank you. We're out of time. If you do have any data on that, would you get back to our clerk and she'll distribute it.

Ms. Wagantall.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you very much for being here. I really appreciate what I'm hearing.

I have one quick question in regard to the Canadian Forces aboriginal entry program. It doesn't sound as if there's a lot of uptake on that, with 30 available and eight actually participating at this point in time. Do you resource through the cadet program as well? In rural Saskatchewan we have a lot of aboriginal young people involved in cadet programs. Do you draw from there as well, or is that a totally different dynamic?

MWO Grant Greyeyes: We have an age restriction of where we can recruit. We cannot recruit youth and we cannot engage in recruiting activities with youth. We can only target people who are available to join the Canadian Armed Forces.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: However, they graduate out of cadets, so they have that background, right?

MWO Grant Greyeyes: There is awareness created in discussion. The cadets and the military are linked. I think everybody can understand that link, but we cannot go actively in there and say—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Yes, I understand. Thank you.

In previous testimony, an individual asked if there is a challenge for our first nations veterans as they transition back into northern Saskatchewan. We're discussing the role of transition and the building of a seamless transition from the Canadian Armed Forces to VAC.

The grand chief of the Saskatchewan First Nations Veterans Association, Steven Ross, gave his comments, and I would like you to comment if you have anything more to add. He said:

> I believe the challenge is still there.
>
> It also depends on how old the veteran is when they leave the armed forces. The older you are, the more experienced you are, and the more mature you are. You can assist your people, your first nation, in that manner, because they look at you differently now.

In that way, I think, you have earned the ability to invest more in your community. He continued:

> With your experience—your global experience, I guess—you're a different person than you were when you left.
>
> They want that kind of person to be counselling [our youth and] our young people. That's what I see.... [However]...the young...people are in a much different situation here, when some of them—and I think many more—are coming out with...PTSD [issues] as well.

That's something he didn't understand, but he said that he knows they're having problems adjusting, problems finding employment, and problems taking classes, and he said that those are the people who really need help right now.

He said:

> When I left in 1968, I went directly from the armed forces to construction in Calgary and worked there for a while. After a couple of years, I went back to the reserve. I worked...for a while...as a labourer, until I finally saw the light and went back to school and to university. After university, it was a whole new world...for me.

I'm wondering about this. With what you're investing in these young people, is there that focus, too, that this may not be your entire life, and that if you're leaving early you don't get that long-term career? What kind of an investment is being made for them? Really, at some point, they're going to transition. He clearly saw that university broadened and opened up a new world for him. What role do you see in the longer picture?

BGen J.J.M.J. Paul: When we are still in uniform, there are plenty of opportunities to get a degree.

Again, this is anecdotal, but when I first arrived at Third Van Doos as a subbie, I was the only guy in a 700-man battalion who had a master's degree. I was the only one. Nowadays, if you go back to any infantry battalion, you will realize that there are probably close to a hundred people who have a bachelor's degree, so it's not only about the aboriginals; it's about the army population in general. We are a way more educated force than we used to be. Obviously, I cannot comment on the specifics of Veterans Affairs programs, because I haven't made that transition here yet, but what I'm hearing is that the programs and those they are working on right now are very generous.

I know that a few of my former soldiers have been through the whole process. Nothing is perfect—right?—but so far, the comments I've heard from my men and women from Kandahar are very, very positive. The opportunities are there when you are in uniform, and when you are moving into Veterans Affairs programs, the programs are there. On top of it, if you are a status Indian you can get the funding from Indian Affairs to do your schooling as well.

I would offer to you that aboriginal veterans with status have two avenues of approach. They can tap into Veterans Affairs programs for schooling, as well as Indian Affairs. That's how I ended up doing a bachelor's degree and a master's degree. My father was a snowshoe-maker and a canoe-maker. I was the first one in my family to get an education. I had the privilege of becoming an officer, and it's because of the support I got from Indian Affairs. Otherwise, I would probably still be on the reserve, which is not bad in itself, but I....

● (1255)

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: No, I understand.

Would you have any comments to make? You're the young guy in the crowd here today.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Sorry, guys. I'm with you.

WO Moogly Tetrault-Hamel: There is a lot to say about it, but it's hard within a short time frame.

As part of my mandate, we are assisting the spiritual support of our members within the Canadian Armed Forces. We're looking at what is available for non-Indigenous members and different religions and then translating that into what could be available for Indigenous people in the military. As we're allowed to continue to wear our sense of cultural identity throughout our career, it facilitates our reintroduction to the community at the end of our military cycle.

Also, as a father of four children—I'm Abenaki, and my wife is Nuu-chah-nulth from British Columbia—I think it's really important that we don't take the culture aspect away from them, because when I retire, it's also going to be a big change for them, my wife and our children, to be able to go there. We want to make sure to use every tool possible to facilitate that for them.

Just to add quickly, to me a uniform is sacred. It may sound strange, but as we move from one area to another across Canada with all the postings, it's not always that welcoming for indigenous people in some of those areas, but when you wear a uniform in those areas, you get respect from average Canadians. It gives you the feeling that you do have a voice, and that's something that.... Again, I have not retired, and I still have long way in front of me, but when I do retire, I strongly believe I will carry on what I have learned from the military in terms of being able to speak up and having a voice that deserves to be heard.

The Chair: I think Mr. Kitchen has something to say, and then we'll be finished.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just want to clarify that when I spoke earlier about being an officer cadet with the CIC, it was affiliated with the PPCLI but was not part of the PPCLI.

The Chair: On behalf of the committee I want to thank you all for taking time out of your busy day to testify and for all that you do for the men and women who serve. If you have anything to add to your testimony, if you get it in written form to our clerk, she'll get it distributed among the committee.

There is a motion to adjourn by Mr. Erskine-Smith.

The meeting is adjourned.

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